



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

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SECRETARY WATT ANNOUNCES SUPPORT OF PLAN TO PRESERVE WETLANDS IN LOUISIANA'S ATCHAFALAYA BASIN

Interior Secretary James Watt today announced his support of Louisiana Governor David Treen's plan for preserving the Atchafalaya Basin.

The half-million acre tract of forested wetlands in southwestern Louisiana has been the center of a decade-long controversy over conflicting uses of the Basin for flood control, agriculture, commercial and sport fisheries, and wildlife habitat.

"Governor Treen's plan will preserve the Atchafalaya's economically valuable fish and wildlife and recreational resources and is fully consistent with flood protection needs," Watt said. "The Governor deserves the highest praise for his willingness to tackle this difficult issue head on, and for his persistence in seeking a solution that is acceptable to landowners, the State, and the concerned Federal agencies.

"Both the citizens of Louisiana and the nation as a whole will benefit from the preservation of the fish, wildlife, and related recreational and commercial resources of the Basin, which contribute nearly \$100 million annually to the nation's economy," Watt continued.

"I would also like to commend the Dow Chemical Company for donating 40,000 acres to the State for preservation. Dow's generous and public spirited action is proof against those who say that America's large private corporations are not interested in environmental conservation."

Treen's plan, which he announced on November 19, calls for the acquisition of "habitat preservation easements" on 365,000 acres of privately owned land in the Atchafalaya. The easements would prohibit conversion of the land to agricultural, industrial, or residential uses. Landowners will retain mineral, timber, and public access rights. Oil and gas activity will also be permitted under the plan.

Plans also call for the purchase, on a willing seller basis, of 50,000 acres of private land in the Atchafalaya. Added to the Dow donation, this land will provide 90,000 acres to guarantee public access for recreational purposes.

The 590,000-acre Atchafalaya Basin is the largest wetland area remaining out of the once vast Mississippi River wetland complex, of which millions of acres have been cleared for agriculture in the last 50 years. The Atchafalaya supports an extremely productive sport and commercial fishery and is home to alligators, bald eagles, wintering waterfowl, resident wood ducks, a large winter population of American woodcock, egrets, herons, white-tailed deer, wild turkey, black bear, bobcat, fox, mink, and other species. The area also contains valuable oil, gas, and timber resources, and is a focal point for the unique "Cajun" culture.

Through water control structures, the Atchafalaya River is able to divert a large volume of water from the Mississippi River during floods, thereby providing flood protection for Baton Rouge and New Orleans. Accelerated sedimentation of the Basin and enlargement of the river from flood flows have threatened the fish and wildlife values of the surrounding wetlands by reducing water levels and by making more areas suitable for clearing and conversion to agriculture. An Agency Management Group, comprised of the State of Louisiana, the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Corps of Engineers, and the Environmental Protection Agency, has been studying alternatives to achieve flood protection, sedimentation control, maintenance of water levels, and protection of fish and wildlife and recreational benefits. Governor Treen's plan incorporates the work of this group and suggestions and assistance provided by a landowners association.

Secretary Watt also said that he was pleased that the Fish and Wildlife Service's work with oil and gas interests in the Atchafalaya Basin had contributed to settlement of the controversy. "Interior agencies under our 'good neighbor' policy should be trying to help find ways in which needed economic development can proceed with the least impact upon fish and wildlife and the environment in general," Watt said. "In this regard, the Service's record in working with oil and gas interests in the Atchafalaya is commendable. I might add that my fish and wildlife people are encouraged by the growing willingness of industry to accept recommendations for measures which will offset the impacts of oil and gas activities in wetlands."